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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the reflections of college seniors on their four years at a small liberal arts school on the verge of major changes. A random probability sample of the senior class of 1972 were interviewed during their final semester before graduation. This class received a relatively traditional education and represents the before group in a before-and-after research design. A semistructured questionnaire was designed with undergraduate advice. A random sample of 38% of the senior class was drawn. The senior also completed the Stern Activities Index and College Characteristics Index. Results indicated the major source of dissatisfaction is the desire for coeducation or a better social life. However, being engaged by graduation, or immediate marriage, are rejected as important goals. The class of 1972 also rejects the pursuit of social standing as such in both the dating and academic sphere. The Stern Indices and the questionnaire results confirm the fact that the majority of the students have important intellectual, achievement, and academic needs and expectations about college. However, the more satisfied seniors do perceive the college environment as providing significantly greater opportunity and encouragement for the satisfaction of intellectual, cultural, academic, and achievement-related needs. (Author/MJM)

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HAPPINESS IS . . . CORRELATES OF ACADEMIC SATISFACTION AMONG UNDERGRADUATES

I. The Senior Satisfaction Survey of the Class of 1972

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Introduction

An educational institution in the midst of dramatic change provides an exciting opportunity to understand the impact of the college experience upon students. This paper describes the reflections of college seniors upon their four years at a small liberal arts school on the verge of major changes. As high school seniors, these girls applied to an institution they probably knew as "the elite of the Catholic girls colleges." Before arriving on campus, they may not have realized that change was already in the air.

At the time of their graduation, the college had initiated an innovative New Curriculum Plan (Eurich, 1973), funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. It had become a secular institution, under a lay board of trustees. Coeducation had been adopted as a policy. The first small group of male students appeared in classes (the class of '72 included 3 full-time male students).

The spacious suburban campus, with beautiful old maple and beech trees, remains physically unchanged (except for additional parking lots, for additional commuters, tucked discreetly in unobtrusive locations). Nevertheless, the forces affecting education nationally are evident here: more older students, more commuters, more Community College transfer students, participants in the New York State Higher Educational Opportunities Plan, etc. (54% of the 1,537 students enrolled in Spring, 1972, were undergraduate women resident degree candidates. By Fall of 1973, 31% of the student body of 1,766 were resident undergraduate women degree candidates.)

As part of a series of studies evaluating the impact of these changes in a 55-year-old institution (Papanek, 1974b;Costa and Papanek, 1974), a random probability sample of the senior class of 1972 were interviewed during their final semester before graduation. This class received a relatively "traditional" education and represents the "before" group in

a "before and after" research design. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed with undergraduate advice. A random sample of 65 (or 38%) of the senior class was drawn.

The seniors also completed the Stern Activities Index and College Characteristics Index. The Stern (1970) Indices make it possible to compare the campus environment, as perceived by the students, to their personality needs. They are an intellectual offspring of Henry Murray's need-press analysis.

Before presenting results, I will comment on a very recent and significant phenomenon: an increased aversion to serving as research subjects, especially among college students, and especially if traditional, lengthy, standardized, computer-scored questionnaires are used. In "Communication with College Students," Webster (1974) lists the wide variety of student-subject refusals to participate in research projects which he has observed within a single year in one institution. They include tearing up of test materials and students' expressions of fears of blackmail. These reactions were virtually unknown in past decades. Recently an entire symposium was devoted to "The Revolt Against Assessment--Where Do We Go From Here?" (EPA, 1973). My third study (Costa and Papanek, 1974) involved seven standardized tests and encountered problems of low participation and rather high resentment among students.

In retrospect, the fact that 86% of the desired subjects in this sample completed a lengthy questionnaire-interview (and 74% of these completed the Stern Indices) seems to be a tribute both to the dedication of the undergraduate interviewers[1] and to the validity of the principles of action research (Lewin, 1948, Sanford, 1970, Bard, 1972). Action research follows Chickering's advice that researchers should, but too "seldom have involved administrators, faculty members, or students-- the potential consumers-- in the process of

planning, implementation, and analysis" (Chickering, 1970). This research, requested by the administration, was designed jointly by myself and an undergraduate experimental social psychology class. I was quite serious about this approach: items the class considered important were included in the questionnaire, whether or not I personally was fond of them. Genuine "client" participation is not the simplest way to work, but the results justify the effort.

Correlates of Academic Satisfaction

Those involved in higher education need to understand the factors which either help or hinder the provision of excellent education. The financial pressures of the day, which strongly affect small, private, relatively unendowed, liberal arts institutions, add urgency to this desire.

The student's experience of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with her college and academic life is not the only criterion of whether the goal of educational excellence has been achieved, but it is a crucial variable. The second semester senior is motivated to reflect upon her experience as she approaches a turning point in her life. Her responses must be interpreted in the light of her situation, which usually involves both eagerness to end the status of "undergraduate," and strong emotions about separation from a setting which, for better or worse, has been a second home for four years. With this context in mind, the results of our survey follow. The research design involves obtaining a general assessment of the student's satisfaction with her college experience, and then examining the relationships between satisfaction and other topics included in the questionnaire and the Stern Indicies. Who is happy and why? Who is dissatisfied? To what is dissatisfaction related?

A. Overall degree of satisfaction with the college experience.

The general level of satisfaction is assessed by several questions. For example when asked, "If you had it to do over again, would you come

to the College," 42% of the sample said "yes," 27% were "doubtful," and 31% said "no." 36% had "frequently" thought about transferring. 77% of the students are willing to contribute to fund drives for the college.

B. What variables distinguish the more satisfied student from the less satisfied?

1. Finding a profession or career.

The student was asked how important each of seventeen aspects of college life was to her. Most frequently chosen as "very important" are: First, finding a profession or career; Second, making friends of the same sex; and Third, being away from home. (The third aspect confirms Becker's (1964) thesis as to "what they really learn at college.")

The student who reports that finding a profession was an important part of her college experience is significantly more likely to state that she would come to the college again (Table I, 1).[2]

If confirmed elsewhere, this signals a major change toward a new perception of woman's place in the world. Thirteen years earlier, for example, an informal survey of Smith seniors found little interest in such plans (Friedan, 1963). Cross (1968) concluded, after surveying several large studies, that in the late 1960's freshman women looked toward marriage, children, and a career, but "for upperclass women the preferred future is that of a housewife with children."

2. Satisfaction with faculty and administration.

Students are generally very positive about their contacts with faculty, and those who are dissatisfied primarily want more contact. In fact, no one checked the option indicating general dissatisfaction with faculty! When asked, "How many faculty do you know well enough to talk with about matters that are not strictly academic?", 90% felt that they knew at least one

faculty member in this category. 44% knew two or three such faculty.

Students who would come to the college again are significantly more likely to be very satisfied with their contacts with the faculty (Table I, 2).

Satisfaction with faculty contacts is significantly related to satisfaction with administration contacts (Table I, 3).[3]

Relationships with the administration are also seen in a very positive light by the great majority (although not quite as positively as with the faculty). Again, students complain, if at all, that they want more contact. 60% of the seniors felt they knew at least one administrator well enough to discuss matters not strictly academic.

This generally satisfactory picture is complicated by the interesting fact that half the students report having one or more "seriously distressing experiences" with a member of the faculty or administration. However, students seem to have found some educational value in their distress. For example, almost half the students reported that they had had two to five courses which were "in some way a bad experience, but they feel they learned a lot."

3. Advising.

There is a significant relationship between more discussion of her courses, and her program, with the faculty advisor and the student's conviction that she would wish to come to the college again (Table I, 4).

Most students (65%) report minimal or no discussion of their courses and program, i.e. their advisor "just signed the papers." Faculty and administration have been concerned about this situation. One goal of the New Curriculum is to increase the depth of advising. However, most students are satisfied with the old system: only one-third want more advising. Apparently, students are often not aware of an advantage to be gained from advising, even though our study shows that they are significantly happier

with more of it.

These results imply that the thrust toward more careful and time consuming advising may meet a mixed reception. Informal evidence in 1973-1974 confirms this prediction. A number of students now complain about the recent increase in advising, and the additional forms involved.

4. Coeducation and social life.

The majority of those who report occasional or frequent thoughts of transferring give the desire for a coeducational school, or a better social life, as their main reason, in their written comments.

The students were also asked to state, in a word or phrase, the best and worst things about their years at the college. 70% give "people" or "friends" as the best thing, and 60% give "social life" or "isolation" as the worst thing.

In this area of the young adult's life the questionnaire shows interesting results, some of which contradict commonly held stereotypes. Not one of our sample said that "trying to get engaged" was "very important," and 95% insisted that it was "not important" to them during their college life. Only one student found "meeting men from Ivy League schools" "very important," while 75% stoutly said it was "not important." "Meeting men from non-Ivy League schools" was somewhat more acceptable as an interest. Nobody said that "attending a school of high social standing" was "very important" to them (73% said it was "not important").

These women seem to be rejecting both the image of an "elitist" ideology sometimes attributed to them and to the college, and a need for immediate marriage. The current generation here apparently does not feel that the pursuit of social standing, as such, is an acceptable value. They wish to find a career and do not place "getting engaged" high on a senior's

priority list, although they do want to date and enjoy social life. Compare this to the finding, more than a decade earlier, that 70% of freshman women at one university said they hoped to find "the man for me" in college (Douvan and Kaye, 1962).

5. Making female friends.

All seniors (except one) had at least one fellow student whom she considered a close personal friend. 42% had two to five close friends, and the remainder had more. (The number of close friends is not significantly related to our several questions on overall satisfaction.)

Those who said that making friends of the same sex was "very important" to them during their college life were significantly more likely to think of transferring than those for whom it was "moderately important" (Table I,5).[4]

It is possible that some students turn to girl friends in disappointment over a lack of opportunity to make male friends. Or we may speculate that the great importance of girl friends is a sign of deperiency, and of an especially difficult struggle to achieve the independence and autonomy the young adult must acquire to feel satisfied with herself. This difficulty may lead the student to the thought that it might be easier to grow up elsewhere, and thus to transferring, perhaps to a college where her classmates were higher in their affiliation needs.

6. Skills acquired.

The students feel the college is highly successful in teaching them skills one might expect a college graduate to acquire. 91% to 96% of the sample feel that they can write a good paper within a limited time period, that they can critically evaluate a work in their field, and that they know how to obtain further information about something in their discipline.

There is a drop in perceived adequacy in a fourth area. Only 73%

feel that they can state a position or present information clearly in a ten minute talk to a group. The college may be well advised to increase its emphasis on skill in oral presentation.

C. Senior satisfaction and the Stern Indices.

These two instruments assume that the population at large shows normal variation along thirty universal human needs. These needs are conceptualized as dimensions which run from one end or pole to another: for example, scale 6, Change-Sameness, consists of ten self-report items indicating either a high preference or liking for Change (which equals a low Sameness score), or a high liking for familiarity and Sameness (which equals a low Change score), or any intermediate score. Other examples are scale 23, relative liking and need for Play versus Work, and scale 13, relative liking and need for energetic versus passive activities (Energy-Passivity) (Stern, Stein, and Bloom, 1956; Stern, 1970).

Please note that no judgmental implication is intended: a particular score does not imply a 'better' or'worse' person. People differ in personality needs as they do in a multitude of other characteristics. The desirability of having a given set of needs is an independent question, related to the value system of the reader.

The thirty ten-item "need" scales of the Activities Index are combined into 12 related sub-sets by the statistical technique of factor analysis. In turn, the Factors are grouped into four Areas.

Parallel to the 30 "need" scales are thirty ten-item scales measuring the perceived environmental "press," called the College Characteristics Index. These ascertain how the respondent perceives others in his environment: fellow students, faculty, staff, and administration. What are their preferences? What needs do they encourage? Does the (social) environment

offer relatively great or little opportunity to satisfy a given need? The thirty CCI "press" scales are grouped into eleven Factors and these in turn are grouped into three Areas.

The parallel assessment of the individual's own perceived needs, and his or her perception of the college environment, on the same dimensions, is a unique feature of the Stern Indices. To my knowledge it is not duplicated by any other measure of college climate.

Two general satisfaction questions from the senior questionnaire-interview were examined in relation to the Factors and Areas of the two Stern Indices, by running Pearson correlations. The following correlations are stitistically significant at the .05 level, the .01 level, or better.

1. The Activities Index.

A "yes" answer to the question, "Would you encourage your sister (if you had one) to attend the College?" is positively related to AI Factor 8: Closeness (r=.30) and AI Factor 10: Friendliness (r=48). It is also related to AI Area III: Emotional Expression (r=.29), which includes both the Closeness and the Friendliness factors. In addition, AI Area III includes Expressiveness, Egoism, Sensuousness, and Self-assertion. Overall, our total female sample is at the national norm on Closeness, Friendliness, and Area III, Emotional Expression. The "total female sample" includes freshmen and juniors also surveyed in 1972 (Papanek, 1974b) as well as seniors.(The total number of respondants is 113 on the A.I.; the number of seniors is 46.)

Stern describes the personality of the individual high in a need to be emotionally Close as one who recognizes a desire to be warm and supportive, nurturant and helpful, who is concerned with love and romance, and with receiving help and support. Friendliness includes desires to be with others, to enjoy an active social life and playful relationships. Area III stresses

high levels of social participation and emotional spontaneity.

2. The College Characteristics Index.

Satisfaction with the college ("Would you encourage your sister . . .?") is significantly correlated to CCI Factor 2: Intellectual Climate (r=.34), Factor 3: Student Dignity (r=.32), Factor 5: Academic Achievement (r=.45), and CCI Area I: Intellectual Climate (r=.38). (Overall, our seniors and total female sample perceive the college climate to be at the national norm on Intellectual Climate and Student Dignity, and slightly (one Standard Deviation) below the norm on Academic Achievement. The total number of respondants on the C.C.I. is 111; the number of seniors is 46.)

Those students most satisfied here are likely to perceive the school as "providing a staff and facilities devoted to scholarly activities and cultural events" (Intellectual Climate), and as having an administration concerned with "maintaining a high level of self-determination and personal responsibility among students, while using a minimum of coercion" (Student Dignity). These students see the college as "setting high standards for achievement," professors as "valuing logic and careful reasoning," and peers as "making a real effort by end-term even if they did less at mid-term" (Academic Achievement). Area I: Intellectual Climate includes the above factors, as well as an emphasis on Work, a Non-Vocational focus, a high Aspiration Level, and an Academic Climate.

It is interesting that the most satisfied students do not perceive the college as more friendly and supportive than less satisfied seniors, even though they have higher needs for closeness and friendliness. Rather, they differ from less satisfied students in perceiving the college as a better intellectual environment, which gives them dignity as adults.

When the Stern Indices are related to frequency of thoughts of transfer

three CCI measures are significant at the .07 level or .09 level: CCI Factor 9: Social Form (r=.28), Factor 11: Vocational Climate (r=.27), and CCI Area II: Non-intellectual Climate (r=.27). CCI Area II includes these factors, as well as Group Life (mutually supportive group activities among the student body), and opportunities for Play.

Students are less likely to have considered transferring if they perceive a college offering informal friendliness, good social skills and form, and a relatively practical, orderly, respect-oriented environment. It seems that this question did tap the environment which would logically satisfy the student with the personality needs located by the previous question, although the correlation is less than that with the intellectual climate.

The overall senior and total female samples perceive the college to be at the national norm on the Vocational Climate Factor, slightly below the norm (one Standard Deviation) on Social Play, and below the national norm on CCI Area II: Non-Intellectual Climate: seniors perceive the college as almost two standard deviations below the national norm. This low score on Non-Intellectual Climate is characteristic of superior, private, liberal arts colleges.

D. Satisfaction with grades.

The construction of a good grading system is an endlessly pursued utopia. Very little is known by faculty and administration about how students in general actually feel about their grades, except when a minority confront their teachers or the dean and make their feelings most explicit!

The student was asked how she felt about her grade in four of her courses, selected at random.[5] The replies are:

"Satisfied; the grade seemed appropriate":	72%
"It was better than I expected":	11%
"I was disappointed, but I feel I deserved it":	6%
"I was disappointed, in my opinion I deserved a better grade":	11%
	100%

91% either felt "satisfied," or at least believed that the grade was "deserved." This is quite an achievement.

This result receives independent confirmation by the fact that student demand, the year following the survey, for an end to the "new" grading system of Honors, High Pass, Pass, and No Credit led to its abolition and a return to the 1972 system. Return to traditional letter grades seems to be a national trend (New York Times, 1974).

What is the relationship between the particular grade received and the student's feelings? One obvious hypothesis is to assume a simple positive linear relationship, which, in fact, appears: better grades are better received (Table I, 6). As the relationship is examined more closely, we find:

1. The best grade is not necessarily the most pleasant surprise! Only 44% of the "better than expected" reactions refer to an A: 31% refer to a B.

2. The great majority of students who got A's thought they should. 86% of all A's received were "appropriate." Virtually all of our seniors desire an and expect to get a B or better and in fact 84% of the time they did. Students may well be disappointed by anything below an A, and feel a B or C+ to be undeserved. The situation is analogous to the finding at Princeton that the great majority of the students expected to stand in the upper half of their class, and thus many are doomed to disappointment (Pervin, 1966).

3. Interestingly, the C+ seems worse than the C. 81% of students reporting a C+ felt it was either "disappointing" or downright "not deserved," while only 37% felt that way about a C.

E. Memorable courses.

Students were asked to select two "most valuable" courses in their stay here, and two which they felt had not contributed positively to their education.

"Best" courses are distributed proportionately among all disciplines. In explaining why the course appealed to the student, the subject matter was given slightly more weight than the instructor. On the other hand, of the less satisfactory courses, the student was definitely more likely to complain of the teacher: "boring," etc. (41%), rather than "I was not interested in the subject" (14%).

Twenty-three percent said they had no "poor" courses. Of the remainder, 28% of the "poorer" courses mentioned are the introductory course in the discipline, whatever the field. This confirms academic folklore about the difficulty of teaching a satisfying introductory course. Possible sources of this difficulty are: 1) the students' problems in mastering the transition from high school, 2) a possible tendency to ask the least experienced faculty to teach this course, 3) a tendency for the student testing new interests to learn what she does not like, and 4) the difficulty of teaching a large heterogeneous group (relative to the advanced seminar for majors).

An alternative interpretation is that the result is due to resentment of the course distribution requirements imposed on this class, and since abolished. Perhaps it confirms the wisdom of that decision, and the introductory course, per se, poses no special problems. This empirical question can be answered in future years.

Summary and Conclusion

The major sources of dissatisfaction are well summarized in the longest handwritten comments made on the questionnaire. One of our most discontented students writes, in response to the question about the "worst" thing about the college:

"Classes were not stimulating and they did not prepare for a career. The school still tries to prepare women for a very limited life of housewife and mother. The very desperate attitude about social events. The feeling that we are here to learn things to amuse us, etc. I frequently felt as if I wasted four years on self-indulgence."

This is certainly not the perception of the college climate held by most students. However, it illustrates in a concrete case the factors also appearing in the statistical tables. The student who does not find a profession, who perceives a dilletante atmosphere, and who suffers from a lack of social life is the most likely to feel very unhappy as she approaches graduation. The woman who finds a potential future occupation, has good relations with faculty and administration, spent time discussing and reflecting upon her course program with her faculty advisor over the years, and considers her friendships with other women a "moderately important" part of her college experience, is significantly more satisfied with her college experience.

The major source of dissatisfaction is the desire for coeducation or a better social life. However, being engaged by graduation, or immediate marriage, are rejected as important goals. If replicated elsewhere, this decreased sense of urgency about early marriage, combined with the high interest in careers, may signify a most important change in college women of today, relative to those of the 1950's and 1960's.

The class of 1972 also rejects the pursuit of social standing as such, in both the dating and the academic sphere.

The Stern Indices and the questionnaire results confirm the fact that the majority of our students have important intellectual, achievement, and academic needs and expectations about college. Note that our more and less satisfied students do not differ significantly in their level of these needs. However, the more satisfied seniors do perceive the college environment as providing significantly greater opportunity and encouragement for the satisfaction of intellectual, cultural, academic and achievement-related needs, on the Stern College Characteristics Index. This is encouraging, and in addition gives us greater confidence in the validity of the Stern CCI.

The results of the Stern Activities Index are interesting, but harder to interpret. Why should students who report higher needs for Closeness, Friendliness, and overall Emotional Expressiveness be happier with the college when they perceive only a moderately "friendlier" social environment than less satisfied students? Perhaps this difference, though modest, is still large enough to be important. Perhaps the person who is more spontaneous in emotional expression is generally happier in most environments.

Students are basically satisfied with the traditional grading system. As elsewhere, A's are widely expected. The most distressing grade is the C+.

The introductory course is disproportionately mentioned as a "poor" course, while "best" courses are found in all disciplines. Courses are seen as good because of the subject as well as the teacher, but disliked courses are usually blamed on the teacher, not the subject matter. These seniors believe they have acquired a high level of the general skills which a liberal arts graduate should demonstrate, with the possible exception of ease in oral presentation.

As educators, what have we learned from this study? Two conclusions stand out. The tradition within liberal arts colleges which emphasizes an intellectually challenging and stimulating environment, the teacher-student relationship, and encouragement of student responsibility, dignity, and self-discipline receives support: graduating seniors are more satisfied with their education when they see the college as stronger in these areas.

Second, as a group, these college seniors are searching for a meaningful occupational niche for their future lives, combined with an opportunity for a coeducational social life. The assumption that she will never, or hardly ever, be active in a career, either by necessity, or by choice, is apparently not the belief of the average senior woman in the class of 1972.

Footnotes

1) I would like to express my appreciation to the members of my Experimental Psychology II: Social Psychology class for their capable and hard-working assistance in questionnaire construction and interviewing for this study.

2) In fact, all of those few students who said that finding a career was "not important" said they would not come here if they could do it over.

3) One might look for a significant relationship, therefore, between contacts with administration and transferring or other measures of satisfaction. While the expected trends appear in the data, they are not statistically significant. This suggests that the role of faculty contacts is the more crucial variable, although contact with administration is by no means irrelevant.

4) There is a trend, not significant, for those who frequently contemplate transfer to report larger numbers of general friends (67% in the 13-30 friends category, compared to 33% of the others). This is consistent with their statement that making friends is very important.

5) The interviewer was given the name of four courses selected via a random number table, by the registrar. For example, the interviewer might ask for the 3rd, 7th, 13th, and 15th courses taken. However, to preserve privacy and the voluntary nature of the subject's participation, the senior herself was asked to give her grade, which was not revealed by the registrar. The student was given the option of checking "I cannot remember," but only one student used this option about one course (which she said was not deserved). I believe any distortion was minor.

Senior Satisfaction Questionnaire Table I

Significant Relationships
Between Selected Questionnaire Items

Items	Chi^2	df	Significance Level
1. 39 & 34:17	11.04	4	.05
2. 39 & 31	11.67	4	.02
3. 31 & 32	19.34	6	.01
4. 39 & 23	10.9	4	.05
5. 37 & 34:9	7.56	2	.05
6. 13 & 14	38.06	6	.001

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